

I have a joke for you. Little Johnnie watched with fascination as his mother smoothed cold cream on her face. "Why do you do that, mommy?" he asked.

"To make myself beautiful," said his mother. Then she began removing the cream with a tissue.

"What's the matter?" asked little Johnnie. "Are you giving up?"

Here's another one: A prospective father-in-law asked, "Young man, can you support a family?" The surprised groom-to-be replied, "Well, no. I was just planning on supporting your daughter. The rest of you will have to fend for yourselves."

Here's another one: "Oh, I sure am happy to see you," the little boy said to his grandmother on his mother's side. "Now maybe daddy will do the trick he has been promising us."

The grandmother was curious, "Really, what trick is that?" she asked.

"I heard him tell mommy that he would climb the walls if you came to visit," the little boy answered.

Here is one more: The boss asked one of his employees, "Do you believe in life after death?"

"Why, yes sir," the new employee replied.

"Well, then, that makes everything just fine," the boss went on. "After you left early yesterday to go to your grandmother's funeral, she stopped in to see you!"

Right about now, you might be wondering, what on earth am I doing telling jokes on Easter? What is that all about?

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, there is a great tradition of telling jokes on Easter, in honor of the great joke God played on Satan when Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. *We tell jokes today to celebrate life, laughter and hope, for that is what this day is really all about.*

I am convinced that we can't really understand the significance of this day, unless we understand the pain and despair behind this day. We know the bigger story. Jesus, came into Jerusalem, he was arrested, tried and killed in such a short time. It caused heads to spin of those who loved him.

His death occurred so quickly. They didn't have time to deal mentally and emotionally adjusting to his not being there among them. His death occurred so quickly, they weren't sure what to do next. They were numb. They couldn't sleep at night. They weren't hungry anymore. They were in shock.

How many times had they repeated to one another, "Can you believe Jesus is dead? I can't believe it."

Coming to grips with the reality of the death of a loved one is such a challenge.

So the women, finally work up the courage to do something and they decide to go to the tomb to finish preparing Jesus' body for burial. It is out of this despair and pain that the first lesson of our Easter story comes to us.

When the women get to the tomb, they discover that the stone is rolled away. A messenger of God is waiting for them to say, "He is not here. He has been raised from the dead. Go and tell his disciples to return to Galilee where he will meet you."

**The first lesson of our story is that God comes to us in our moments of deepest despair to comfort us.** I know this is true, because I have experienced it in my own life. This past summer when my daughter Whitney was killed, you as a church surrounded me and our family with prayers, cards and support in a way that is real and profound. We as a family have come to believe that you have been our messengers of God, reminding us of God's deep and profound love for us.

In your moments of pain and despair, have you opened yourself up to God's presence? Who has been a messenger of love and hope for you?

In the joy, fear and excitement that overtakes the women, they go to run and find the disciples to share the news. Jesus meets them and gives them a message. "Go and tell my disciples that to return to Galilee, I will go before them and meet them there."

**And we get the second lesson of our story, which is that God sends us into the world to share the hope and life we have already experienced.** This doesn't mean we won't face challenges in life, because we will. It doesn't mean that life will automatically become easy, because we trust in God. Because it won't. It simply means that we are not alone and that God is going to be with us on our journey. And that knowledge can help us face our fears and challenges, no matter what they may be.

Chris is a teacher. Most of the work she does involves at-risk youth. One time she was working with a group of teenage girls. They were half-way through the program. The group had progressed smoothly through all the elements and had now progressed to the Wire Walk.

The Wire Walk involves climbing up a pegged tree to a wire cable, 25 feet off the ground, stepping onto the wire cable, then walking across the cable, holding on to a loosely tied rope five feet above. During the entire process from ground to finish, the participant is attached to one end of a climbing rope for safety. The other end is controlled by a trained instructor.

She says, "We spent some time talking about the emotions the girls had, then I asked, who was willing to try. A few girls raised their hands and they were able to complete the Wire Walk with little difficulty. Once the other girls saw their success, a few more were ready to go.

"Who would like to be next?" I asked. A few girls said, "Susie's ready." Sensing her reluctance, I asked Susie if she was ready. She answered, "I suppose."

Susie was safely tied in and standing at the foot of the tree. I took up the slack in the rope and I watched her make the long reach for the first peg. The group applauded her efforts with rally cries and cheers. Then I watched Susie's face tighten with every step. I wanted so much for her to do the Wire Walk. I knew how good it would make her feel. But I'd seen this fear many times, and I realized she would not go much further.

She was halfway up when she embraced the tree in a big hug -- the kind of hug a small child gives a parent's leg after being frightened. Her eyes were shut tight, her knuckles white. With her cheeks pressed against the bark, all I heard was, "I can't."

The other girls sat in silence. I began to quietly talk to Susie, trying to get her to ease her grip enough to lower her down. I talked for what seemed like a long time. Then I ran out of words and was quiet.

The silence was broken by Mary. "I will be your friend no matter what, Susie!"

My eyes filled with tears, so much so that I could barely see Susie clinging to the tree. By the time my eyes cleared, I saw that she had lifted her head to look up to the wire. The white in her knuckles had gone flush. She turned to look down to Mary and smiled. Mary smiled back. I was on the job again, taking up the slack in the rope until Susie reached the wire.

Susie made it all the way across the wire. When she returned to the ground, the first hug she looked for was from Mary. We all cheered.

Susie made it, when she believed in herself, with encouragement from Mary. Like Susie, sometimes our fears have us clinging to trees. Like the early followers of Jesus sometimes our pain leaves us numb, not sure how to go on. But Jesus comes to us to say, "I believe in you, I will be your friend, no matter what. Go and tell others what you have experienced."

There is no greater love than this. For if God believes in me and in you. Maybe, just maybe, we can trust God enough to believe in ourselves too.

Amen